

On getting stuck and unstuck



Author Ramona Ausubel discusses maintaining energy levels while working on long-term projects, upholding self-imposed deadlines, and finding readers for your writing.

October 17, 2023 -

As told to Hurley Winkler, 3791 words.

Tags: Writing, Education, Process, Time management, Inspiration, Focus.

What do you do when you get stuck in a project that you've been working on for a very long time? How do you get unstuck?

I feel like that's my actual profession: to get stuck and then get unstuck. That's what I actually spend most of my time doing. It happens mostly in fiction for me. But maybe that's what we all are doing all the time. That might be what life is, I feel like, is taking something as far as you can and then being like, "I actually don't know what to do next." And then, having to figure out, "Okay. So how is that an opportunity?"

I remember early on, especially in my first draft of my first novel, where it just felt so scary to get stuck. I felt like, if I got stuck, I would discover that it was not going to be possible for me to do this project, because if I didn't know how to fix this one thing or I didn't know how to move forward from a particular scene or situation, then that might mean that I couldn't be a writer. It felt like the stakes were just impossibly, horribly high.

And as I've gotten further along, I've come to feel really differently about that. I still have the moments of, "This might fail." But now, first of all, it's like, "This situation might fail, this scene, this character, this idea that I have for a story. That might not work the way I thought it would." But it's no longer attached to, "Will I be able to keep writing?"

There are so many ways to re-energize something and to come in with a completely fresh perspective, then layers and layers and layers of that fresh perspective is what makes something feel big and whole and nuanced and complicated and finished. That's the only way it gets to finish. I think it would be not just impossible for me to start at point A and go in a straight line to point Z, but it would also mean that I'd only drawn one line. And that one line does not make a story. That's just a line. So we have to have that. Getting stuck is part of the process. It's necessary and it's good.

Do you feel like you've re-trained your brain through the years so that, when you do get stuck, instead of panicking, instead of feeling like the stakes are so high, you can pretty immediately see it as an opportunity? Or do you still feel a little bit of panic and then find the opportunity angle?

There's definitely still some panic. And it's harder the farther in I get. I feel very little panic in the short story writing process in general, because it's small enough that I can hold it in my head at the same time, and if it should happen that that story never goes anywhere, that is okay. I have a few pages of lots of stories that I've never finished, and that does not cause my heart to shatter. It's fine. It cost me a few hours. It's all right. We could move on. Maybe I'll even dig back through that folder and resuscitate that story someday. All good.

The panic is more in the novel writing process, especially as I get really far in. In my last novel, I had a moment where I realized that one of the characters needed to not be alive—one of the main characters—because he was doing nothing for the book. He was just a shadow of his wife, basically. And he sort of repeated her things, but he didn't add anything. And I realized that if he was dead, he would suddenly become a very important force. He then becomes an absence that everybody is circulating.

And that was a really scary decision to make, and it felt like the kind of decision that really makes you wish that an official source would pop over your shoulder and be like, "Yes, ma'am. You should do that. That's a good idea. It will work," because it's going to be a bunch of work to go through every page of the manuscript and not just remove him, but make his absence a presence and then recirculate the whole story around that absence. It was a humongous undertaking. And what if it doesn't work? Then I'm back to starting over again. So that's where the panic of, "Should I try it? What if it fails?" That definitely enters the frame.

But usually, my sort of medicine for that is, "Yeah. This totally might fail." And there's no non-effort way to move forward. There's nothing in writing that's ever just like sliding gently down the hill into a lagoon of warm water. That is just not what it is. Maybe every once in a while that happens for a second, but mostly you're trudging and climbing and effort is being expended no matter what you do. So, "All right. This month's effort is what if we kill off a character and see how that feels?" And I might spend a whole month on it, and it might go nowhere, but then I will have learned something. No matter what happens, I will have learned something, and if it doesn't work, I'll come back with a new perspective.

In that case, it totally worked, and it was like now it is unimaginable that the book could ever have existed with him alive. It's so core to what the novel is, and that happened in the, I don't know, maybe the eighth draft. I was so far along.

Wow.

But I just didn't know until I knew. And then, I had to trust it and try it and commit, even though I wasn't ever going to be sure whether it would work.

How long does it take you to develop a sense of trust for a crazy, huge change like that?

It really depends. Sometimes it's very obvious, very quickly. The same thing happened when I was working on my first novel, which was at first written in first-person plural, so a "we" voice for the entire book. And being a first-time novelist, I had no idea what I was doing. And that is a hard-ass point of view to take on, but it also felt very important because it was the teeth of the whole book for me. It was this collective village, and they were speaking together. So I knew I needed it, but it was just making it really hard to enter the book. So I had the same, "I think I need to try it where I have moments of that voice, but also we're settled with one character."

My husband and I were traveling at the time, and I had us pull over on the side of the road on our trip. We were in Egypt, and I was like, "We're just going to stay in this tiny little shack that we've rented on the coast, and you're going to go snorkeling, and I'm going to sit here at this miniature desk and look out at the ocean and I'm going to try this. I'm going to just change the point of view. I'll just give myself a week. I'm going to try it." And I could feel, within three pages, the way the book was opening up. I was just like, "Oh, for sure, this is definitely the right thing to do."

I always try to give myself enough time to go far enough with it that I feel like I really can see what I've done. I won't let myself panic and back out of an attempt after a day or two days or a few pages. You've got to really mean it and try, because otherwise, it would be too easy to almost try a thousand things and never long enough to see whether they're working. And that's just more work. You've actually just added so many jobs. It's much harder to try a thousand things for a second than one thing for two weeks.

Do you often bring in outside readers into your work when you're a few drafts in? What does that process look like for you?

I like to work for quite a long time on my own. I'm the kind of messy discoverer. I don't enter with an outline. I really don't know how it's going to work. And I really need a lot of safe, private space to do that discovery and to make big messes and to add a character, drop a character, change a point of view, move the setting, jump to a setting that seems to make no logical sense but which feels interesting to me, where a reader from the outside would read all those things and just have so many logical questions. They'd be like, "Wait. Huh?" And I don't need those. Those questions are not helpful to me because I know that I don't know those things yet.

Right.

So I like to have a big swath of space and usually a few drafts all on my own, where I'm just in that playful, safe discovery mode. And then, once I feel like I've kind of got the world—that it exists, it's alive, and nothing anybody else could say would make it not be alive—that's key. My greatest fear is that I would show somebody something and they'd be like, "I don't think it's a thing," and all the air would leave and I would not know how to revive it. So I want to wait. I want to be past that, where I feel connected enough to it and it feels alive enough for me that, no matter what anybody says, it will not just perish and wilt into the sand.

I have a group of readers in L.A. who are friends from grad school, and we meet kind of whenever anybody has something. So we don't meet regularly, but when one of us has a manuscript—short, long, whatever it is—we just sort of send up the bat signal and we all get together. So they're usually my first readers. And I love them because they really care about me and they really believe in me, but they also hold me to a really high standard and they're really excellent writers. So I want to give them something that will be at that level. I feel like they give me permission to reach higher than I might if I was handing it to some lady down the street.

And then, my husband usually reads the novel, or if it's a short story, I like to read it aloud to him. He never writes me any long comments. I don't ask. He'll fix things, like proofread, as he's reading, and that's helpful. But he's more of the person that I can puzzle things out with. So I think it's really great to have a reader where you can be like, "Okay. What if the guy's job was, he's a pilot. What would that do?" After that, it usually goes to one other writer friend and then my agent. So it's kind of a small little circulation, but I know that system by now. And I love that I feel like I have confidence in between this sequence.

What recommendations do you have for writers who are looking for readers for their work and maybe don't have that infrastructure of an MFA cohort?

I live in Colorado, and we have a really wonderful workshop called Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver, and they have short and long classes as well as full-year manuscript classes. But there's a lot of stuff that happens online now. I really like writingworkshops.com, and they have lots of classes online with really great writers who are serious and mean it and are there to actually help. So just like if you find a reader in any of those kinds of places where you're like, "I feel like you get what I'm trying to do," make friends with that person and do not ever let them go. And know that that person probably needs you just as much as you need them.

I went to grad school, and then we all left and didn't trade work for a long time. And I was working on my second novel and feeling so lost and distressed and lonely in it. And my husband was like, "You know you have writer friends. Why don't you call them and see if they would like to talk about writing with you? Because I really don't know what I'm doing. I'm happy to help, but I'm not the person that I think you need right now." And it felt scary to reach out to them, but I sent an email and within five minutes all of them had responded like, "Oh my god. Thank you. I'm so glad you wrote. I'm dying here. This would be the best thing ever." And we were all living in Southern California for a few years, so we would meet every month. And whole books have been written because of that group. We all needed each other. So trust that it feels scary to reach out to somebody—a reader that you like and somebody that you feel like you could be useful to each other—but they want that, too. It's so important for everybody.

Are you the kind of writer who sets deadlines for herself?

I do. I really need to have some structure for things, partly because, of course, the deadline makes me actually do it. But it gives me sort of a container for the project, especially if I'm working on a first draft. I like to

write first drafts kind of quickly so that I can get past all of the parts of my brain that will try to stop me and be like, "But we don't know what we're doing. We don't know what this scene is, so how could we possibly write the next scene?" And I'll be like, "Shh. You have no place here, reason brain. Please sit down over there. I made you a cup of coffee. You need to stay still, because I have five pages to write today, so we don't have time for those kinds of questions."

I like to write a first draft kind of quickly, but what that also means is that other parts of my life take a backseat during that drafting process. So if I'm writing a draft of a novel in eight weeks, which I've done a couple of times, then it means that I will be slower on emails that are not necessary. I will not be making tricky dinners. I will be doing the minimum. I won't be hanging out with friends as often. But it is important for me to know that, at the end of that eight weeks, all of those things come back and take their place at the center of my life again. So I feel better about saying, "I can't blurb right now," or, "Let's meet in October, because I'm in a writing moment right now and need to protect this time." The deadline partly works as a way for me to structure that and then feel less guilt and less discomfort with all of those things that are sort of stacking up on the side. And it just gives me bravery. I don't have to know what I'm doing, but I do have to do it because I made that agreement with myself.

Do you find that it's helpful to manage other people's expectations in your life when you're going through a writing moment like that? Letting them know, "Hey, I need some space right now," that sort of thing? I know you have a family, and I know you teach as well, so you have a lot of people in your life that could probably be affected by something like that.

Yeah. Exactly. Completely. I have a colleague, Camille Dungy, who's an amazing poet and a nonfiction writer. I really admire her in every way, and she's very clear in her communication. During the summer, her email responder was, "I will check emails once a day starting on August 1st until school starts. That is what you can expect, for me to check my email once a day. So if you respond again, you will not hear from me until the following day." That's so wonderfully clear. And it's a sign of respect for other people's time. It's not just like, "Sorry, everybody. I've got the most important thing going. All of you can suck it." But, "No. I respect your time, and this is what you need to do to respect my time, too." So just being really honest and clear about that, I feel like, is helpful for everybody.

How do you conduct research for the fiction you write without being totally pulled under by it? Research can be such a form of distraction for me, and I don't really know how to juggle it with the writing process.

I feel like we all have to solve it our own way. I know people who do months or sometimes even years of research first and do no writing in that time and are just in research mode, collecting information, gathering sources, putting it all in organized files and folders in Word or in apps or whatever. And I think that's so cool, and I do not know how to do that. I don't have the kind of memory where enough of that would stay with me to be useful to me over that timescape. So I like to do research and apply it more quickly and be in a smaller loop.

I keep a list of things that I need to look up. Sometimes it's small things like, "Oh, what was the song that came out in 1994 that they might've been listening to in this moment?" or, "What kind of knives would a chef who's in this sort of restaurant carry home with him?" Those are little facts that I'd like to have in the book, but I do not want to stop in the middle of a writing day to look them up, because then I will also look at those weird sandals that that other mom at dropoff was wearing. I try to keep it really straight, like, "I'm just writing right now." I switch off the wifi on my computer. So all week long, Monday through Thursday, I'm keeping my list of all the things that I need to look up. And then, Friday is just research day. I am not writing. I'm not trying to produce words. I'm just doing all of that stuff, and I'm going back and I'm popping them in. And it feels very satisfying because I've got my nice long list. And then it's like, "Ooh, research is fun." It feels like a break from writing, but I'm doing all the useful stuff at the same time. And then, Monday, I'm back to writing.

Research is being folded in, and I dip back into the land of facts. The world is tremendously strange and beautiful, and if you use research well, it will provide more energy and things from the outside that swoosh in and change the kind of color of a project in a really beautiful way.

Ramona Ausubel Recommends:

Italian pistachio spread. It is the smoothest thing that you could ever put on your tongue. It's incredibly pistachio-y, and it's sweet, but not too sweet, and if you just put it on a piece of bread, your whole life is better.

Walking a kind of uncomfortably long distance. That's another unstuck strategy: just getting out of my house and moving my body across land. Actually, most days, I just take walks around my neighborhood and go in loops. But I think one of my absolute favorite things is walking to transport myself somewhere. I was in Europe a lot during the summer, and my favorite days were the ones where I walked, like, 17 miles in a day, all through Paris, just everywhere. I never boarded a vehicle. I just was on my feet. I stopped to eat when I was hungry. I saw people doing things. I listened to conversations. I sat in the park. If I'm recommending something to myself, that's what I would recommend doing.

Lanolips Lip Balm. I live in Colorado, and it's very dry. This lip balm is made of sheep lanolin. I have a stockpile of tubes of it, because the idea of losing it and not having it is very scary to me.

Knitting. I've been knitting my whole life. It's kind of the only thing I learned in elementary school. I think I went to kind of a hippie school, and we really didn't gain any information about anything, but I learned how to knit. And it's a very important part of my life. I knit when I'm listening. Any conference, faculty meeting, sitting and just listening at a reading—I listen so much better when my hands are busy. And I also make things for people I love. All the time, I'm making something for somebody I care about, and that is so cool. I just love that. I like to listen to an audiobook and knit a lot or listen to a reading and knit, and then it feels like all of that language and those stories are getting folded into the project in some way. So then, not only am I giving somebody something cozy that they can wear, but folded into that are all the stories that I have heard and gathered in that time. And it just feels like such a cool way of embodying my job in a way that I don't get to otherwise.

Green tea spritzers. It's just green tea with fizzy water and lots of lime juice and maybe a little bit of something sweet and some mint. My brain doesn't like coffee. It's too much for me. I get all zig-zaggy and I feel bad. I love the taste of coffee, so I'm constantly in a search for something that makes me feel like I live in the world and I'm cool like all the coffee drinkers, and this is the summer version that has really been satisfying.

Name

Ramona Ausubel

Vocation

author and teacher

□

Beowulf Sheehan